Montesquieu’s [DRAFT PREFACE*].[1]

4

In this work we have sought to explain this famous usurpation of the world which the Romans made by a work of seven hundred years by a constant force and policy by a continuation of the same project in good and in bad fortune by a combination of causes which have always lent themselves to this design finally of a thing which has no example in history and which according to all appearances will never have one:

For if one were to compare the empire of Alexander with that of the Romans it would be to compare the work of one day with that of several centuries, the play of fortune with the masterpiece of wisdom and conduct.

There are few peoples who have not cost the Romans as much effort as the Persians had cost Alexander, and whatever this prince had done in the passage from the Granicus to the Arbelles to the Issus cannot be preferred to most of the Roman capiteins [captains, leaders].

The success was great, but the war was very small; a state weak in itself was conquered, and was not defended either by military knowledge or by courage or by prudence

3

The history of the Romans has been sought in their laws, in their customs, in their police, in the correspondence of their private

[1] Editors’ note: On this Preface, finally abandoned, see our Preface, p. 42: “We shall first give the text of a preface, in Montesquieu's own hand, which he did not ultimately use. This manuscript, which cannot be dated (we do not know whether it was intended for the first edition in 1734, or the second in 1748), is in Montesquieu's own hand. It has been kept in the Bordeaux municipal library (call number Ms. 2512) since 1994. We have no explanation for the succession of numbers (from 4 to 1) which precede each section.”

individuals, in their treaties with their neighbours, in the mores of the peoples with whom they had to deal, in the form of the ancient republics, in the situation in which the world was before certain discoveries made since then, and finally, an attempt has been made to explain what happened in the empire by what happened in the republic.

2

I had at first thought only of writing a few pages on the establishment of the monarchy among the Romans, but the greatness of the subject won me over, and I went back imperceptibly to the early days of the republic, and then descended to the decadence of the empire.

1

One will at first be reluctant to read a work on a subject which has been treated by a thousand authors, but if I have said new things the work will by that very fact become more interesting.